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U.S. Revokes LI's Metro Area Status

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In a move already sparking protests from politicians and business leaders, federal officials have reversed a 25-year-old decision and stripped Long Island of its status as a metropolitan area separate from New York City.



The decision, while a seemingly arcane matter that deals with statistical reporting, diminishes the Island's identity, local leaders say, and could lead to a loss of millions of federal dollars.

"This is a huge problem for Long Island and also a vastly underestimated problem," said Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington). "Because of the state of our federal budgets, there are hardly any discretionary dollars left. By lumping us in with the five boroughs of New York City, we are going to be competing with the city for whatever crumbs are left in many federal programs."

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget last Friday released the new guidelines for how different parts of the country will be defined statistically.

Under the previous guidelines, Nassau and Suffolk counties -- with a population of 2.75 million people - - were considered by the federal government as a primary metropolitan statistical area. Although Nassau and Suffolk were part of a consolidated metropolitan statistical area comprised also of New York, Northern New Jersey, the primary designation allowed the Island separate statistical status.

Now, Long Island is known as the Suffolk County-Nassau County, New York Metropolitan Division. It is one of four such divisions in what is called the New York-Newark-Edison-NY-NJ-PA Metropolitan Statistical Area.

"We fought like hell" to be a separate statistical area in the early 1970s, said Lee Koppelman, Long Island's veteran planning chief, who vowed to fight the OMB decision.

Koppelman said the Island would no longer get some vital statistics, such as individual income, from the federal government. OMB officials said they would still provide data to the Island and other areas also no longer statistically separate. They did not define what type of data they would make available.

What irked Long Island officials was that under the new OMB guidelines, some small towns maintained their status as separate entities. For example, Malone, an upstate New York town near the Canadian border, with a population of about 6,000, is considered a separate Micropolitan Statistical Area. OMB guidelines say areas are considered Micropolitan if they are in regions where there is a "cluster" of towns and villages with a combined population of 10,000.

Under the new guidelines, metropolitan divisions would not be able to be compared to metropolitan

areas, so, Nassau-Suffolk could not be on lists with places like San Jose, Calif., which often attract similar high-tech industries.

Island officials say they fear that the region's identity will be diminished if it is not set apart as a separate statistical area by the U.S. government. One Suffolk planner, Roy Fedelem, said the Island might well be dropped by national magazines such as Money, which frequently issues lists of the best places to live in the U.S. But even more worrisome, officials said, is the prospect of losing federal dollars, because under the new guidelines they will be shared by the wider statistical entity.

Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi said "millions of dollars" could be at stake under the new guidelines. Suozzi said funding could be diminished community development grants, block grants, and emergency shelter grants.

Israel said he is contacting the other members of the Island's congressional delegation, and the state's two U.S. senators, Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schummer, both Democrats, to request a meeting with OMB officials to change the designations.

Paul Mackun, an OMB geographer, said the agency held a series of meetings about the changes, going back to 1998. Mike Bergman, an OMB spokesman said, "There were about 60 hearings (regarding the changes) throughout the country. This is not something that just happened overnight."

Mackun, asked if the designations could be changed, said "These were the final rules set out. They were based upon previous federal registers which invited comment from a great deal of the country."

But Long Island officials successfully fought an OMB decision in 1993 that would have taken away the region's separate status. OMB relented after a strong lobbying campaign.

Long Island was first named a separate Metropolitan Statistical Area in 1972 by President Richard Nixon, after years of lobbying by politicians and business leaders. Mitchell Pally, a vice president of the Long Island Association, the region's largest business and civic organization, vowed another fight.

"We will argue once again why Long Island should be its own MSA," Pally said.

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